

# Raising rabbits — for meat and making money, it's hard to beat this creature on the homestead

By Jayn Steidl Thibodeau

**R**abbits. Everyone who has ever tried to raise a garden has cursed them at one time or another. Hunters stalk them in the cool autumn air, hoping to bag enough for a tasty stew. Moviegoers cry over Bambi's friend Thumper, or laugh as Bugs and Elmer Fudd battle in cartoonland. But domestic rabbits could add another dimension to this portrait of rabbits. Domestic rabbits (an entirely different species than the wild rabbit) not only have the capability of producing enough meat from a single pair to feed a family of four for a year, but also can be an economically viable commercial enterprise for your homestead.

Mike and I have raised rabbits for nearly 20 years, and believe me, we have made every mistake in the book—and a few not even listed. But overall, we have learned that rabbits are hardy, inexpensive to purchase and feed, and (providing a few simple rules are followed) not particularly labor-intensive, compared with other livestock.

## Shelter

Housing will be the most expensive item in a beginning rabbitry, but used cages are available at reasonable prices in most locales, or it is a simple matter to build your own. Many rabbit raisers utilize an old shed to hang cages. Others simply put the cages under a tree in the great outdoors. We don't recommend the outdoor method because feed-to-weight conversion is better in a controlled environment. Close contact with wood also increases the incidences of an aggravating little critter called the ear mite. If you are using an old shed or a chicken house, be sure the ventilation is ade-



*Here's a nice litter of California hybrids at three weeks.*

quate and the roof doesn't leak. Walls and doorways should be secured to keep predators away. The neighbor's cat may look cute lolling about on top of a cage, but when a nervous mother stomps an entire litter to death, the humor in the situation is hard to find.

Having a source of water available is a must. You can utilize automatic waterers instead of using the old crock method, which often leaves the animals without water for extended periods of time. Automatic waterers are very simple to set up using either a pressure reducer or a gravity flow system. Several styles are available. The tube type is great for a warm climate and is really simple to repair. The PVC styles run into a bit more money to set up, but are great for cold weather areas. A heat tape can be run through the lines to prevent water freeze-up. These styles and others are available from dealers of rabbit supplies.

Much of the decision about what breeds to choose will depend on your market. Some people will find that a

pet market is what they are most comfortable supplying and will choose to raise a dwarf breed or one of the popular lop or Dutch belt breeds. There are commercial markets that buy pet rabbits for resale to pet stores. The main drawback to this particular operation is that demand is seasonal, peaking at Easter, but rabbits must be bred on a regular schedule year-round. Finding a market for a rabbit that weighs only two or three pounds is difficult, and many breeders resort to the snake food market for disposing of excess stock.

Show rabbits are another "iffy proposition." Out of a litter of five, there may be only one rabbit that is of show quality. What happens to the excess?

Some breeds, such as the Rex or the Satin, produce gorgeous pelts. If you tan hides well, you may be satisfied with these breeds and find a ready market for your wares at craft fairs.

But if you are interested in a really profitable rabbit, it is best to stick with a white-furred, pink-eyed meat breed

such as a New Zealand or a California. These breeds have been bred for generations to be prolific and for mothering ability and rapid growth. Some other breeds, such as Flemish Giants, have been crossed on the New Zealands and Californias with great results for fryer growth rates, but when kept as does, they are usually too large and eat too much to be cost-efficient.

Colored stock occasionally surfaces in these white breeds, but commercial buyers discriminate in their pricing strategies against the coloreds, so don't save any for your own breeding stock, even if they are pretty.

## Marketing

Commercial rabbit processors are located throughout this country, and rabbit is a popular export to Canada. Reports of widespread shortages of rabbit indicate that the market is in a stable cycle, and this is an ideal time to begin a rabbitry. To locate a processor near you, you could check with other rabbit raisers, or purchase a subscription to the magazine published by the American Rabbit Breeders Association (see below). There is a commercial section in the middle of the magazine which lists commercial prospects as well as current market reports.

Rabbit growers are an enterprising group of people, and the majority of rabbits raised in this country do not come from large rabbitries of 1,000 or more does, but rather from small back-yard growers of 10 or 12 does.

Those fortunate enough to live near a processing plant may deliver their own rabbits or have a driver with a designated route who will pick up the livestock at a pre-determined spot for delivery to the plant. Some groups of rabbit raisers have even formed informal co-ops with members arranging for large numbers of rabbits to be contracted by the processor and picked up. If you choose this method, be sure your members are reliable; if the con-



*Freddy Rivera shows the proper way to hold a doe.*

tracted number of rabbits is not available on the date specified, it will be difficult to deal with that company again.

Meat rabbits are also a popular item with home marketers. The meat, which is low in cholesterol and tastes somewhat like the white meat of a chicken, is in high demand from certain ethnic groups and is a popular barbecue choice. If you choose to sell your rabbits from home, be sure to sell them live and do any butchering only as a favor to your customer. Accepting money for butchering an animal brings you into USDA and health department jurisdiction, and the facilities required aren't cheap.

## Choosing stock

When you pick out your stock, choose does and bucks less than one year of age. If a rabbit is being culled from a rabbitry because it is a bad mother or won't breed, you don't want to blow your hard-earned cash on it. If a doe hasn't bred by a year of age, she probably never will. Likewise, if someone offers you a couple of last year's Easter bunnies who have always lived together, avoid them like the plague. They probably won't breed.

Look for clean forelegs—rabbits clean their noses with their paws and dirty paws indicate illness—and clean anal areas. Hocks (the bottoms of the feet) should be free of sores; thin foot pads that can lead to sore hocks are a genetic trait you don't need passed on. The eyes should never be cloudy or filmy.

Teeth should be short. If an animal has teeth that don't quite meet properly, the result is malocclusion, or buck teeth, which curl around the mouth, making it impossible for the animal to eat. These teeth must be clipped regularly or the rabbit will starve. It is widely believed that this is more often caused by a recessive gene carried by the doe and the buck than by accident or injury, so don't introduce the trait to your rabbitry if you can possibly avoid it.

Check the ears for scaly brown scabs. This is a sign of the ear mite problem we mentioned earlier. If left untreated, it can cause nerve damage (wry neck) and the animal will have to be destroyed. If you do wind up with this problem, a dose of mineral oil or cooking oil will clear up the problem cheaply, or catalogs carry a variety of medications.

Run your hands over the body of the animal and feel for any hidden abscesses.

## Prices

Rabbits are cheap in comparison to other livestock for the homestead. Prices vary according to the size and age of the rabbit selected. A good fryer-sized rabbit (4½ to 6¼ pounds) of about 2½ to 3 months should run less than \$5, while an older doe of 6 months to a year may run as much as \$25. If you opt for the higher-priced rabbit, ask to see the breeding records on the parents of that animal. They will give you an indication of how the animal will perform. The lower-priced fryer size won't come with records, as it is probably aimed at the meat market, but for the price, you may want to

take a chance and just breed out any defects that appear in subsequent generations.

Some companies advertise the sale of certified or registered rabbits. These can be quite expensive and are certainly not necessary for someone who intends to produce a meat animal. Investigate such companies thoroughly before investing. Most are legitimate, but a few have had complaints.

Because rabbits are so cheap, you may be tempted to over-buy. As with any livestock, get your feet wet before diving in. Rabbits are a seven-day-a-week job, and you may find that they don't fit in with your lifestyle. Ten does and two bucks are an excellent number for a fledgling commercial enterprise. As you grow, you will want to save your own stock from your best animals. It is wise to keep at least one buck for every ten does, with replacements coming up at every stage of growth at all times.

## Breeding

Every doe will need her own cage, plus a cage for her fryers after they are weaned. The does are ready to breed at about eight pounds or six months of age (later for the Giant breeds), and at that time you will take her to the buck's cage—*never the other way around*. Does are territorial and can hurt the buck if they feel threatened in their own territory. You will know that the doe is in season if the vulva is slightly swollen and purplish in color. She should breed within a few minutes. If she doesn't, remove her and try it another day.

The buck should breed her twice, and this will finish him for the day. (This is why two bucks are recommended for ten does.) Don't overwork your buck or you will lower the sperm count, resulting in smaller litters. Mark the date she was bred and which buck is the sire in a book or on a calendar.

Each doe will ideally produce seven or eight bunnies in 30 to 32 days, and

you should have a nest box in the cage a few days before. Nest boxes can be made out of scrap lumber. They should be 9" wide by 18" long and 8" tall. We bought old wooden army surplus ammo boxes for about \$2 each, and they have worked beautifully. The doe will put some of her fur into the filling material (pine shavings or fine hay) for the babies, which are called *kits*. The kits will be blind, deaf, and bald when they are born, but they grow quickly and will be out of the nest box in about 2½ weeks. You can breed the mother again at three weeks after delivery, although some commercial rabbitries do it sooner. The kits will be ready to wean at five weeks of age.

Some does will have more kits than they can raise, and other does may only have three or four. Neither is a desirable rabbit, but if you have a doe with too many, just remove a few from her box and give them to the doe who doesn't have enough. Most does will raise just about anyone's kit, no questions asked. Be careful when you stick your hand in the cage, though. Even though you selected calm, sweet-tempered does, maternal instinct is protective, and you may receive a nasty bite for your efforts to help. Wearing gloves might be a good precautionary measure.



*Partial view of the rabbitry. There's a lot of manure under the cages, but the worms keep it from overwhelming us.*

## Feed

Feed is the most expensive item in a rabbitry, but costs can be cut by getting together with other raisers, contracting for larger amounts at one time, and negotiating for a lower cost. Lots of people try to mix their own feed, but nutritionally, a pre-mixed pellet is best for the rabbit. Most commercial feeds are non-medicated, containing about 17-18% protein, 17% fiber, and 2.5-3% fat, and the rabbits produce and grow well on these ratios. The most important things to remember about feeding are to find one brand and stick to it, and to remove any moldy feed.

Buying feed in bulk is cheaper, but storing feed for long periods may break down vitamins. Feed should be stored in a dry area, such as a plastic trash can, to prevent water damage. High humidity is also a problem, as the moisture causes the alfalfa meal in the pellets to swell and break apart, allowing mold to form. Moldy feed is a major culprit in rabbit enteritis.

Rabbits have very delicate digestive systems. Because they are so small, any slight diarrhea can kill in a matter of hours. Rabbits are like people when it comes to body condition. Some rabbits will get overly fat on just a little feed, while others are downright scrawny on full feed. A good rule of thumb is to keep your non-lactating does on about four to six ounces per day in the summertime, increasing slightly in the winter, while lactating does and fryers should have all they can eat.

Any change in feed should be introduced gradually. A little hay or alfalfa cubes are a helpful treat for your rabbit, but avoid such rich items as carrots, fresh grasses, or lettuce. Rabbits are best fed at night, because they pass soft feces that are re-ingested, much like a cow chewing a cud. Although they can do this at any time, it is usually a night-time activity and feeding in the evening seems to benefit the animal.

Summer heat is hard on a rabbit; they are more tolerant of colder weather. Older bucks have been known to go sterile in high temperatures, resulting in a lot of money spent on feed and no income from fryers. Keeping back some young replacement stock in January to be ready to breed in the summer months helps. We had one enterprising friend who moved her bucks into an air conditioned room, but she found that rabbit hair kept clogging up the cooling unit.

Cleaning the rabbitry can be a nightmare or a paying proposition, depending on your management. It still amazes me how many of those little round pellets a rabbit can produce, and when there are eight or nine fryers in the cage, the mountain just seems to grow and grow. Fortunately, rabbit manure is a commercial enterprise in itself. Gardeners love it, or it can be the basis for a commercial worm farm.

From our first year, local gardeners would show up at the rabbitry, shovel in hand, offering to clean the place for the manure. We tried this a couple of times, but found that it didn't really work out. The does were upset by strangers banging around in their house, and usually people weren't particularly careful about our equipment or the mess they left behind. A fellow rabbit raiser solved the problem by removing the manure to the back of the building and letting people load up feed sacks at a dollar or two a sack.

Being strapped for time with other livestock to care for, we decided to pursue a different route, and Mike's worm farm was born. The simple addition of a few thousand worms into the manure has kept the build-up under the cages to almost nothing and there is no problem with ammonia or odors. And as an added bonus, he has gardeners and fishermen lining up all spring and summer for the little critters. We still clean out, but only once a year for our own gardening purposes.

Rabbits can be a paying proposition with little more input than an hour or

two a day for even a large rabbitry of 50 to 100 does. With proper management, a steady supply of fryers will not only pay the feed bill, but will also produce a regular income and even some excess meat for the freezer.

To appreciate the productivity of rabbits, consider this comparison: A 1,000 pound cow will produce one 500 pound calf per year. In contrast, one doe producing six litters of eight kits can produce 200 to 240 pounds of live weight in a year. So one hundred 10-pound does (that is, 1,000 pounds of rabbits) will produce 24,000 pounds of live weight per year, compared to the cow's 500 pounds.

A wide variety of marketing tactics can be employed with the enterprise, and even the waste products have a commercial value. The disposition of the rabbit is such that young children can help with the rabbit chores, and handling the rabbit requires no expensive equipment, like squeeze chutes or corrals. Literature is widely available, often at a nominal cost. And best of all, although the rabbit is very hardy, if a doe does die, the loss will not put you out of business, as she can be replaced for less than the price of a movie. Is it any wonder that the rabbit is the animal of choice for so many homesteaders across the country?

## For more information

Mail-order catalogs carry a variety of rabbit-raising equipment and reading material. Listed below are some of the catalogs we have used or which have come highly recommended by fellow raisers. Prices vary with each catalog, so be sure to comparison shop.

### Catalogs

**Bass Equipment Company**, P.O. Box 352, Monett, MO 65708. Midwest: (800) 798-0150. West Coast: (800) 369-7518. Fax: (417) 235-4312

**Da-Mar's Equipment Company**, 14468 Industrial Pkwy., South Beloit, IL 61080. (800) 95-BUNNY

**Jeffers**, P.O. Box 948, West Plains, MO 65775. (800) 533-3377. Fax: (417) 256-1550

**K.D. Cage & Supply Co.**, 1820 S. CO 850 E., Newcastle, IN 47362. (800) 265-5113

**Klubertanz Equipment Co., Inc.**, 1165 Highway 73, Edgerton, WI 53534. Orders: (800) 237-3899. Customer Service: (608) 884-9481

**Morton Jones**, P.O. Box 123, Ramona, CA 92065. (800) 443-5769

**Safeguard Products, Inc.**, P.O. Box 8, New Holland, PA 17557. (800) 433-1819. Fax: (717) 355-2505

## Reading material

The American Rabbit Breeders Association, Inc. Official Guidebook

Cash Markets for Rabbits, by Jack Messner

*Domestic Rabbits*, Voice of the American Rabbit Breeder's Association, Inc. Available to members of the ARBA. Membership is \$15 per year for a single membership and includes a subscription to the magazine. Contact Glen Carr, Secretary, Box 426, Bloomington, IL 61702.

Domestic Rabbit Guide, an ARBA Publication

How to Start a Commercial Rabbitry, by Paul Mannell

Modern Commercial Rabbit Farming, by Jack Messner

Raising Rabbits the Modern Way, by Robert Bennet

Rabbit Production, by Peter R. Cheeke, Ph.D., Nephi M. Patton, D.V.M., Ph.D., Steven D. Lukefahr, Ph.D., and James I. McNitt, Ph.D.

All of these publications are listed in most of the catalogs we have mentioned here, with prices ranging from \$2 to \$26.95. Excellent information is also available from your local county extension agent or state university agricultural department, often free of charge. Δ